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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the scope and historical significance of biographies and autobiographies of ex-slaves. The document focuses primarily on accounts of black women published from 1820-1860, but also discusses several narratives from colonial times. Exploits of famous women slaves including Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth are analyzed along with accounts of lesser-known black women who made major contributions to black kinship and cultural ties. Primary sources such as "Twelve Years a Slave," by Solomon Northrup, and "Aunt Sally: The Cross Way of Freedom," author unknown, characterize the conflicting roles played by black women in plantation life. Roles included mother, wife, sister, aunt, grandmother, family member, propagator of the black race, field laborer, domestic slave, transmitter of values to black children, and concubine to white slave owners. The body of slave narratives reveals a cross-section of relatively contented, well-treated and cooperative slaves and bitterly rebellious ones. Review of the literature indicates that black women were often able to help maintain stable family relationships and that black familial bonds were too strong to be completely severed by white oppression. (Author/DB)

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# SABLE QUEENS IN BONDAGE

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## Reading, Independent Study, and Research on the American Slave Narrative

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September, 1977

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"No other women on earth could have emerged from the hell of force and temptation which once engulfed and still surrounds them with half the modesty and womanliness that they retain."

-- W.E.B. DuBois

Of all the documents available to the general reading public, perhaps none are more illustrative of slavery in America than those personal accounts left by the slaves themselves. No fiction rivals their peril and adventure; no poetry celebrates their love of freedom; no music mimics their inherent blues; and no sermon professes their undying faith. In addition to providing valuable information about the black man's social, cultural, and historic survival in this country, the slave narratives (or the biographies and autobiographies of ex-slaves) reflect a unique view of the people and the system which, in the name of profit, utilized every conceivable means to attempt to subjugate and dehumanize blacks. The focus of this discussion is primarily on the black woman, and we shall look to the narratives to help us define and appreciate the conflicting roles that she was forced to play. We shall also examine the majestic strength that evolved as she selflessly worked to forge and perpetuate the unique, adaptive culture which continues to sustain black Americans today.

The names and exploits of such women as Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth are fairly well known. Called the "Moses" of her people, Harriet (Ross) Tubman made nineteen rescue trips to the South to lead over three hundred slaves via the "underground rail-

road" to freedom in the northern states and in the more receptive land of Canada. Despite a price of $40,000 on her head, she remained undaunted in her resolve to "help others be free" and could proudly boast that she had "never lost a passenger " in ten years of "engineering." Sojourner Truth, originally named by her Dutch master as Isabella Baumfree, is generally known for her fearless advocacy of human rights. In a style uniquely her own and resplendant with biblical metaphors, this illiterate woman "preached" up and down the land, mesmerizing commoners and Presidents, alike.

Yet there were many "significant others," to borrow a phrase from Stanley Elkins. Women like Harriet Jacobs, who concealed herself for seven years in a nine by seven by three foot garret, before escaping to the free state of New York; or the young woman who, like Henry "Box" Brown, was sealed in a crate and conveyed as freight to the home of an abolitionist.[1] Ellen Craft, nearly white in appearance, disguised herself as a male slaveowner. Accompanied by her darker husband, who feigned to be her servant, they successfully journeyed to the North. Then there was Elizabeth Keckley who used her skill as a seamstress to purchase her freedom and that of her son. Later she became the confidante and modiste to Mrs. Abraham Lincoln. The life stories of these and countless, sometimes nameless, others reveal how the average black woman, at a price almost too dear to pay, maintained a dignity and courage far in excess of human expectation.

To understand her achievement, it is necessary to place the black woman in the proper familial perspective and to underscore the important assumption that despite the slavocracy and its de-

bilitating regime, kinship and cultural ties were not only well established, but also functionally operative during the years of American slavery. The vital role of the female as propagator of any race can hardly be questioned. What is noteworthy about the black woman, however, is the considerable attention given her in the literature of those who knew her best -- her people. This is of even more significance in view of the fact that the vast majority of the narratives were written by men and necessarily reflect a male perspective. Yet it is from this perspective that we can see an added dimension of black womanhood. Few narratives overlook the influence of a mother, wife, or sister. Nearly all proclaim the life-sustaining force personified in both nominal and real grandmothers and aunts. These remembrances, in addition to the several accounts left to us by the women themselves, enable us to determine that contrary to mythology about the dominating matriarch -- contrary to historical documentation, both racist and sexist in nature -- black women were often able to help maintain stable family relationships and to pass on to their children the absolutely essential lessons of love and survival.

Before attempting to support what may appear to be an extravagant claim, the slave narrative as an authentic literary genre should be given some attention. It might also be helpful to place them in an historical context. The greatest bulk of the narratives were published between 1820 and 1860. They became especially popular after 1831, when the abolitionist cause had gained momentum. Some,however, were available in colonial times and in the latter part of the eighteenth century. These included, among others, John Saffin's Adam Negro's Tryall (1703); A Narra-

tive of the Uncommon Sufferings and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon, A Negro Man (1760); A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, A Black (1785); The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African (19789); and A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, A Native of Africa (1798).[2]

Unquestionably, most of the slave narratives were produced with the aid of sympathetic Northerners. "Some were dictated to or ghosted by white writers. A large number of others, however, were written by the ex-slaves themselves. Some of the fugitives used fictitious names and places because they feared recapture. But there is little doubt of the essential genuineness of the greater part of this literature."[3] A large percentage of the narratives acknowledge editorial revisions for the purposes of condensation, orderly arrangement, or corrections in orthography (the usual task of publishers in general). Still others are prefaced with letters from reputable persons or reports from various committees assigned to confirm the veracity of the accounts presented. Additionally, there are numerous travelers' journals and collected documents which corroborate the truths revealed in the narratives. Finally, we may look for verification in the numerous folktales which "provide an invaluable source of knowledge of the lives and thoughts of thousands who were once slaves. Plantation life as pictured here in its multiplicity of folkways and folk notions, as seen by the field hand, house servant and artisan, against varied backgrounds of Southeast and Southwest, of tidewater and inland, lowland and upland region.[4]

To the objection that the slave narratives were written by men and women not representative of the masses of slaves, Gilbert Osof-

sky writes: "The great slave narrative, like all great autobiography, is the work of the especially perceptive viewer and writer. In describing his personal life, the sensitive and creative writer touches a deeper reality that transcends his individuality."[5] In what is perhaps the most definitive study of the slave narrative as a literary genre, Many Thousand Gone: The Ex-Slaves' Account of Their Bondage and Freedom, Charles Nichols comments that the body of the slave narratives "runs the whole gamut from the relatively contented, well treated and cooperative slaves . . . to the bitterly rebellious ones. . . . In fact, the narrators had so many ordeals in common (work loads, living conditions, punishments, feelings of fear and guilt)" that to "reproduce a series of capsule biographies" would prove "tedious in their repetition of these details."[6] To avoid such repetitions, this discussion will be organized according to the various roles the black woman played in plantation life. Concomitantly, it will attempt to reveal that, in many instances, black familial bonds were much too strong to be completely severed by white oppression.

The "auction block" was almost invariably one of the life experiences of the slave. After meticulous preparation, sometimes including a thorough washing in greasy dishwater, they were paraded like so many animals to be bartered for or purchased by prospective owners. Insolvent masters needing ready cash and prosperous plantation magnates seeking to increase their labor force, swarmed to the market to bid on what they considered nothing more than human chattel. Solomon Northrup describes the proceedings:

> [Dealers] would make us hold up our heads, walk briskly back and forth, while customers would feel of our hands and arms and bodies, turn us about, ask us what we could do, make us open our mouths and show our teeth, precisely as a jockey examines a horse which he is about to barter for or purchase. Sometimes a man or woman was taken back to the small house in the yard, stripped, and inspected more minutely. Scars upon a slave's back were considered evidence of a rebellious or unruly spirit, and hurt his [or her] sale.[7]

A traveler in the South recorded that the women often sat "huddled close together neatly dressed in gray; young Negro girls with white collars fastened by scarlet bows and in white aprons."[8] It was not uncommon that they were queried as to whether or not they could produce one child per year.

While awaiting sale or transportation to another market, slaves were kept in "pens." According to John Brown the slave pen of the notorious dealer, Theophilus Freeman, "had three tiers of rooms with heavily barred windows. On the top floor of the building was a 'flogging room' where uncooperative articles of property might be subdued. Young, handsome female salves were set apart in their own room, for they were to be sold as concubines. The other slaves were quartered indiscriminately. The building stood in a large, fenced-in yard where the Negroes were compelled to take exercise from time to time."[9]

Such places were often the scenes of the separation of whole families, of parent from child, or husband from wife. The heart-rending sadness and desperation of slaves is fully documented in narrative after narrative, revealing not only the bonds of affection, purportedly nonexistent in the slave family, but also the sustaining faith of those who could only look to Providence to guide and protect their loved ones. Sojourner Truth commented: "I have bourne

thirteen chillun and seen 'em mos' all sold off into slavery, and when I cried out with a mother's grief, none but Jesus heard."[10] Sally Williams records that as she was about to be transferred to another plantation, her mother made a gesture symbolic of the ties between them: "Suddenly, the old woman broke from her grandchild's hold, and running after her daughter, untied her checked apron from her waist and threw it toward her daughter, asking her own in exchange, which was given. Simple pledge! yet was it as dear to them as if it had been a girdle of gems."[11]

To be sure, despair often motivated mothers to resort to violent threats. One ex-slave tells how her mother, about to be sold to a distant plantation, was ordered to leave her baby with her former master. "At this, ma took the baby by its feet, a foot in each hand, and with the baby's head swinging downward, she vowed to smash its brains out before she'd leave it. Tears were streaming down her face. It was seldom that my ma cried, and everyone knew that she meant every word. Ma took her baby with her."[12] Though the circumstances involved an unsuccessful escape attempt, neither did Margaret Garner make idle threats:

> . . . seeing that their hopes of freedom were vain, [she] seized a butcher knife that lay on the table and with one stroke cut the throat of her little daughter. . . . She then attempted to take the life of the other children and to kill herself, but she was overpowered and hampered before she complete her desperate work.[13]

Of course, most mothers endured the wretched practice of family separation, but the scars of its cancerous effects were obvious. Northrup describes Eliza's transformation:

> When we left Washington, Eliza's form was round and plump. She stood erect and . . . presented a picture of graceful strength and elegance. Now she was but a thin shadow of her former self. Her face had become ghastly haggard, and the once straight and active form was bowed down, as if bearing the weight of a hundred years. . . . I never saw her afterwards. Having become useless in the cotton field, she was bartered for a trifle. . . . Grief had gnawed remorselessly at her heart, until her strength was gone; and for that, her last master, it is said, lashed and abused her most unmercifully. But he could not whip back the departed vigor of her youth, nor straighten up that bended body to its full height, such as it was when her children were around her. . . . [14]

For the average black woman, however, the most significant transformation took place within them; and, as we shall see, the pain of family separation often strengthened their resolve to reunite.

At the time of the sale, however, they became members of a slave train, that despicable mode of transportation that shackled men with iron collars about their necks and handcuffs about their wrists. For additional security, long chains of iron bound one man to another. "The female slaves were secured by a rope, and since they were not handcuffed, compelled to carry the small children and the bundles."[15] In the narrative of Sally Williams is described her five-week trek from North Carolina to Alabama, averaging fifteen miles per day.

When they reached their destinations, women performed numerous tasks in the daily upkeep of plantation life. Mrs. Ellis, a Canadian refugee, reports: "I did a great deal of heavy outdoor work, -- such as driving team, hauling manure, etc. . . ."[16] In the region of the Bayou Boeuf, lumberwomen were common laborers and, according to Solomon Northrup, "they performed their share of all the labor required on the plantation. They plough, drag, drive team, clear wild lands, work on the highways and so forth.

Some planters, owning large cotton and sugar plantations, have none other than the labor of slave women."[17] The latter was true because women showed particular dexterity in picking cotton, but on the average plantation both male and female (sometimes husband and wife) were engaged as field hands. Harriet Tubman, as a matter of fact, preferred field work to domestic chores. Her biography further reveals: "Although she was only five feet tall, she became solid, muscular and so strong that her strength was exhibited as one of the sights of the plantation."[18]

While laboring in the cotton, sugar, or rice fields, many women were forced to leave their children unsupervised in their cabins or under the "care" of others. Henry Bibbs states that his daughter was left "to creep under the feet of an unmerciful old mistress," who slapped the child viciously for crying after her mother.[19] To prevent such mistreatment, many mothers left their children with aunts or grandmothers. It was more common, however, for the women to take their children with them to the fields and place them near a fence or under the shade of a tree. At stipulated rest periods, they were allowed to suckle their children while others went for water. Issac Williams recollects his mother's ingenius contrivance for simultaneously caring for her children and working long hours in the rice fields: "She carried him securely fastened to her back, with his baby brother tucked in her dress in front, because she would not leave them to be neglected in her cabin, nor lay them down where snakes might crawl over them, by the fence."[20] An anonymous Mississippi planter records that the following provisions were made for children:

> A large house is provided as a nursery for the children, where all are taken at daylight, and placed under the charge of a careful and experienced woman, whose sole occupation is to attend to them, and see that they are properly fed and attended to, and above all things to keep them as dry as possible, under the circumstances. . . . The suckling women come in to nurse their children four times during the day; and it is the duty of the nurse to see that they do not perform this duty until they have become properly cool, after walking from the field.[21]

In her Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation, Frances Kemble suggests that in many cases, these "nurseries" may have been, in fact, mere huts and that the "experienced" care-takers were often too old and infirm to contribute to the daily work of the plantation:

> . . . there was an old crone called Hannah . . . whose face and figure, seamed with wrinkles, and bowed and twisted with age and infirmity, really hardly retained the semblance of those of a human creature, and as she crawled to me her almost half naked body was exposed through the miserable tatters that she held on with one hand, and her poor blear eyes wandered all over me. . . . One or two forlorn creatures like herself. . . and the half starved and more than half naked children apparently left there under their charge, were the only inmates I found in these wretched hovels.[22]

Field hands were required to be in the fields at daylight and labor until it was too dark to see. This done, additional chores had to be completed. Animals had to be fed, wood chopped, meals prepared, and children instructed.[23] Sally Williams writes of her mother's seemingly tireless devotion:

> Why the family happiness centers in her and this poor slave woman, in her own narrow sphere, was as important as any white mother who graces an elegant house and counts her children as jewels! Somewhat stern she was, rarely talking much with her children, but training them to the best of her ability in all industry and honesty. Every moment she could gain from labor was spent in spinning and knitting, and sewing to keep them decently clothed.[24]

To supplement their meager diets (a weekly individual allowance of three and one half pounds of bacon and corn enough to make a peck of meal),[25] many slaves cultivated small gardens. Still others hired out their skills in order to earn money to buy furniture and clothing. Sally Williams took in washing and sold cakes. Elizabeth Keckley took in sewing. Some worked with such persistent industry as to accumulate enough money to purchase their own freedom and that of their loved ones.

Hard work was also the lot of the pitiable "breeder woman." Especially after the abolition of the overseas slave trade in 1807, every slave master and, of course, the slaves themselves knew that the essential value of adult women rested in their capacity to reproduce the labor force. As publicized in the American Cotton Planter, it made good sense to take care of these valuable women: "Well treated and cared for, and moderately worked, their natural increase becomes a source of great profit to the owner. Whatever, therefore, tends to promote their health and render them prolific is worthy of his /the owner's/ attention."[26] However, the slave narratives reveal that little attention was afforded these women, and the consequences were dire. Some were not only required to labor in the fields until the latter months of pregnancy, but were also compelled to return three weeks after confinement. Under such circumstances, it is not surprising that the infant mortality rate was high and the women, themselves, suffered painful maladies. Frances Kemble records the following:

> Fanny has six children; all are dead but one. . . . Nancy has had three children; two of them are dead. Sally has had two miscarriages and three children born, one of whom is dead. She came complaining of incessant pain and weakness in her back. . . Char-

> lotte . . . had two miscarriages and was with child again. She was almost crippled with rheumatism, and showed me a pair of swollen knees that made my heart ache. . . . Sarah . . . had four miscarriages, had brought seven children into the world, five of whom were dead, and was again with child. She complained of dreadful pains in the back, and an internal tumor which swells with the exertion of working in the fields; probably, I think, she is ruptured. She told me she had once been mad [temporary insanity induced by constant childbearing and hard labor in the fields] and had run into the woods, where she contrived to elude discovery for some time, but was at last tracked and brought back, when she was tied up by the arms, and heavy logs fastened to her feet, and was severely flogged.[27]

In countless instances, the master himself was the "stud." Some sought to minimize paternal resemblance by shaving the heads of their offspring, but more often than not, they were "unblushingly reared for the market." As Southern law mandated that "children shall follow the condition of the mother," slave owners sought to increase their "holdings" in every possible way. Illegitimate mating was both encouraged and enforced and, in some cases, permanent bed partners were selected for women. Such unceremonious practices were often met with resistance, but the threat of flogging or starvation usually produced the desired results.

Those who chose their own mates simply had to obtain the master's consent. If a ceremony was requested the master, himself, might perform the rites. Charles Grandy recalled his master's role:

> . . . He would lead you 'an de woman over to one of de cabins and stan' you on de porch. He wouldn't go in. No, sir. He'd stan' right dere at de do' an' open de Bible to de first thing he come to an' read somepin real fast out of it. Den he close de Bible an' finish wid dis verse:
>
> Dat yo' wife
> Dat yo' husband
> I'se you' marsa
> She you' missus
> You married.[28]

In the case of favored servants, slave preachers or white religious leaders sometimes cemented marriages. However, the average slave couple was permitted to publicize and legitimize their union by marrying with a lamp, carrying a glass of water on their heads or, most commonly, by "jumping the broom." Unknown to the slaveholders, the latter ceremony probably stemmed from a West African ritual which reportedly kept evil spirits away from the newly joined couple (including the imposed dissolution of their marriage) and repressed inter-slave conflict.[29]

While clearly an economic factor to the slave owner, marriage and family were measured by the slave with entirely different values. To the young slave woman, the birth of a child not only increased her value, but it also diminished the likelihood of her separation from husband and family. In his fascinating study of the black family, Herbert Gutman explains: "It hardly mattered whether the child was born prior to or after marriage, . . . but had much more to do with the social and familial beliefs and needs of slave men and women bound together in affective kinship groups."[30] Even in the several cases in which the husband and wife lived on separate plantations, many slave marriages were kept intact. This fact is documented in the several accounts which reveal that fathers visited their families as often as permitted or, more frequently, when not permitted. The father of Sally Williams walked fourteen miles every month to see his family. Later when Sally herself was a wife and mother, her husband visited once per month "giving what help and encouragement he could to the mother, and bringing her his little earnings, to assist in providing for the child. Sorrowful meetings

and partings they were, and yet pleasant, because all they knew of affection and sympathy was in them."[31] We can see from these two examples, alone, that "standardized obligations did not depend upon co-habitation" and that, in fact, some type of family structure did exist among slaves.

Further, we know that almost every account of the runaway slave uncovers the prime importance of the family. After every one of his numerous escapes, Henry Bibb returned to rescue his wife and daughter. William Wells Brown insisted that his mother accompany him on an escape attempt. Once Harriet Tubman had journeyed approximately five hundred miles and had traversed a half dozen states before reaching the "promised land," she reflected:

> I had crossed the line of which I had so long been dreaming. I was free but there was no one to welcome me in the land of freedom. I was a stranger in a strange land, and my home after all was down in the old cabin quarters, with the old folks and my brothers and sisters. But to this solemn resolution I came. I was free, and they would be free also. I would make a home for them in the North, and the Lord helping me, I would bring them all there (underscoring mine).[32]

One more indication of the family's importance to the slave can be seen in the previously mentioned fact that a good number of parents, through long and determined efforts, purchased their children and vice-versa. Clearly, something other than the white man's social standards kept taut this remarkable familial bond; and it is not unreasonable to suggest that the "extended family" was at the core of black survival.

We need only look at the Reconstruction period to view the widespread desertion of plantations, as families sought to reunite and establish permanent homes. Even limiting this point to the

period of enslavement, nearly all of the narrators speak of grandmothers and aunties who, in the absence of their natural mothers, raised them and their children as well. We also read of the grandfathers and uncles who passed on to these children the wisdom of their own experiences. Sally Williams remarked: "There is a strong community of feeling among the slaves, and they are always ready to assist those who are less fortunate then themselves."[33] Runaway slaves solicited and obtained assistance from other slaves living on distant plantations. It was very common, as in the case of Harriet Jacobs, for friends and relatives to harbor fugitive slaves and keep them informed of the master's intended strategy for their recovery. While some may not support the moral duplicity implied in the following statement by John Brown, a clear sense of communal loyalty is evident: "I am sure that as a rule, any one of us who would have thought nothing of stealing a hog, or a sack of corn, from our master, would have allowed himself to be cut to pieces rather than betray the confidence of his fellow slave. . . ."[34] The black family, then, in both its nuclear and extended form, "derived its strength from norms within the slave culture itself" and, despite the outrages leveled upon its members, retained a cohesion and stability which many presumed destroyed.[35]

Domestic slaves were often associated with the betrayal of the slave community. Henry Bibbs stated:

> . . . they are encouraged and trained by [their masters] to report every plot they know of being formed, about stealing anything, or running away, or anything of the kind; and for which they are paid. This is one of the principal causes of the slaves being divided among themselves, and without which they could not be held in bondage one year, or perhaps not half that time.[36]

Undoubtedly, such behavior was common to those who held no hope of freedom and, therefore, sought to gain favor with their masters. However, there were others who, because of their intimate contact with the slave owner's family, were enabled to interpret white culture and, in some cases, to warn fellow slaves of impending disaster. Those who served as cooks were known to smuggle food to the malnourished and to befriend the motherless child. Her lot, nonetheless, was by no means easy. Harriet Jacobs describes how every meal had to meet the master's complete satisfaction:

> The cook never sent a dinner to his table without fear and trembling; for if there happened to be a dish not to his liking, he would either order her to be whipped, or compel her to eat every mouthful of it in his presence. The poor, hungry creature might not have objected to eating it; but she did object to having her master cram it down her throat till she choked.[37]

It is fairly common knowledge that many domestic slaves served as wet nurses to the master's children. Additional duties usually included housekeeping, washing, sewing, and tending to the mistress of the house. Harriet Jacobs relates the story of her great-aunt, maidservant to Mrs. Flint. So that she might be within call, she was forced to sleep on the floor of the entry near the chamber door of her mistress:

> She kept her station there through summer and winter, until she had given premature birth to six children; and all the while she was employed as night nurse to Mrs. Flint's children. Finally, toiling all day and being deprived of her rest at night, completely broke down her constitution, and Dr. Flint declared that it was impossible she could ever become the mother of a living child. The fear of losing so valuable a servant by death, now induced them to allow her to sleep in her little room in the out-house, except when there was sickness in the family.[38]

Domestic servitude, though sometimes envied by those who had to labor all day in the hot sun, clearly wrought its disadvantages. In addition to her physical exploitation by the mistress, the house slave was also susceptible to sexual exploitation by the master. Harriet Jacobs for years evaded her master's advances. His rage became uncontrollable when he learned that she was, instead, lover to his white neighbor. Elizabeth Keckley was subdued only after four years of constant threats and punishments.

As we have already seen, the master's lascivious conduct was by no means limited to the women in the "big house." "When a /slave girl/ is fourteen or fifteen, her owner, or his sons, or the overseer, or perhaps all of them begin to bribe her with presents. If these fail to accomplish their purpose, she is whipped or starved into submission to their will."[39] Lerone Bennett accurately points out that "despite what some commentators say, every sexual contact between slaveowners and slave women was a symbolic or de facto rape, for the simple and obvious reason that the institution of slavery and the power of slaveowners destroyed the possibility of free choice."[40] For those slave women who readily succuumbed to relations with their masters, their hope was that their mulatto children would be better provided for. It was not uncommon that the masters would, indeed, pamper their concubines and bastard children. Such had been the case of Eliza, mentioned earliter in this discussion. Solomon Northrup described her as being "arrayed in silk, with rings upon her fingers, and golden ornaments suspended from her ears. Her air and manners, the correctness and propriety of her language -- all showed, evidently, that she had stood above the common level of a slave. . . ."[41]

"The ladies in crinoline had a lot to put up with," writes C. Van Woodward. He continues: "And they did put up with it, many of them, but only in their own fashion. . . . The ladies were reticent, evasive, often willfully blind about what sometimes went on in their own backyards."[42] Mary Boykin Chestnut, a slave owner's wife, confided to her diary a similar sentiment:

> God forgive us, but ours is a monstrous system. . . . Like the patriarchs of old, our men live all in one house with their wives and their concubines; and the mulattoes one sees in every family resemble the white children. Any lady is ready to tell you who is the father of all the mulatto children in everybody's household but her own. Those, she seems to think, drop from the clouds.[43]

Such may have been the response of a few southern belles, but the ex-slaves report that the mistresses' wrath was openly and unyeildingly expressed. Consider the ambivalent position of Patsey:

> If she uttered a word in opposition to her master's will, the lash was resorted to at once, to bring her to subjection; if she was not watchful when about her cabin, or when walking in the yard, a billet of wood, or a broken bottle perhaps, hurled from her mistress' hand, would smite her unexpectantly in the face. The enslaved victim of lust and hate, Patsey had no comfort of her life.[44]

While the narratives do not indicate that white women frequently mated with black slave men, such practices did occur. Referring to the white daughters of slave owners, Harriet Jacobs reveals: "They know that the women slaves are subject to their father's authority in all things, and in some cases they exercise the same authority over the men slaves." If a child is the result of such a union, "the infant is smothered, or sent where it is never seen by any who know its history."[45]

Many women made limited but significant decisions about their sexuality. According to a medical journal published in 1860, abortive medicines were widely used. Included among these were homemade concoctions of "tansy, rue, roots and seeds of the cotton plant, pennyroyal, cedar gum, and camphor, either in gum or spirits." Some resorted to "violent exercise" and "external and internal manipulation." Cited also was the example of "a slave woman who stuffed 'a roll of rags about two or three inches long and as hard as a stick' into her vagina."[46] How effective these contraceptive measures were is highly questionable, but the important point here is that black women were cognizant of the daily hazards that might await them and consciously chose to keep their own black families intact. Without a doubt, the black man was placed in an awkward and precarious position. Afforded no protection by the law, he literally risked his life when prompted to protect his wife. "Josiah Henson's father was whipped and his ear cropped for striking an overseer who attempted to rape his wife."[47] Many a woman prevented her man from avenging an insult or a beating she had suffered. It took enormous strength to put aside her personal injury "to convince him that the test of his masculinity was self-restraint, not some action that would deprive her of a husband or her children of a father."[48]

Such personal sacrifices bespeak the nobility of the black woman who, forced to play conflicting roles, developed incredible strength and resiliency. The constant stress and danger imposed upon her and her loved ones made her weary and sad, but she never relented in her goal to weave cultural ties so strong that the tyranny of white oppression could not destroy them. Lerone Bennett

reminds us that similar "appraisals of the historic role of the black woman are arguably extravagant, but they are rooted in an extravagant history, and it is impossible to appraise the appraisals or the women without an understanding of the harsh history . . . that scarred, purified, strengthened and annealed that unique phenomen called Black woman."[49] Black women of today can pay no better tribute to these sable queens of old than by unveiling their proud heritage and forging ahead with the same dignity and courage. Only then can we hope to demolish the barriers that continue to separate us from a better life for all black people in all parts of the world.

ENDNOTES

[1]Cited in Gerda Lerner (ed.), Black Women in White America: A Documentary History (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), p. 59.

[2]Charles H. Nichols, Many Thousand Gone: The Ex-Slaves' Account of Their Bondage and Freedom (2d printing) Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), p. ix, x.

[3]Charles H. Nichols (ed.), Black Man in Chains: Narratives by Escaped Slaves (New York: Lawrence Hill and Co., 1972), p. 7.

[4]Quoted in Gilbert Osofsky (ed.), Puttin' Off Ole Massa (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1969), p. 47, 48.

[5]Ibid., p. 10.

[6]Nichols, Many Thousand Gone, p. xii.

[7]Solomon Northrup, Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northrup: a Citizen of New York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841 and Rescued in 1853 from a Cotton Plantation near the Red River in Louisiana, in Gilbert Osofsky (ed.) Puttin' Off Ole Massa, pp. 263, 264.

[8]Quoted in Nichols, Many Thousand Gone, p. 14.

[9]Ibid., p. 17.

[10]Quoted in Eugene D. Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), p. 456.

[11]_____, Aunt Sally; The Cross Way of Freedom. A Narrative of the Slave Life and Purchase of the Mother of Rev. Issac Williams of Detroit, Michigan (Cincinatti: American Reform Tract and Book Society, 1858), p. 112.

[12]Ophelia S. Egypt, J. Masuoka, and Charles Johnson, Unwritten History of Slavery: Autobiographical Account of Negro Ex-Slaves, Social Science Institute, Document No. 1 (Nashville: Fisk University, 1945), p. 288.

[13]Quoted in Gerda Lerner (ed.), Black Women in White America, p. 61.

[14]Solomon Northrup, Twelve Years a Slave, pp. 310, 311.

[15]Nichols, Many Thousand Gone, pp. 17, 18.

[16]Benjamin A. Drew, A North-Side View of Slavery: The Refugee or the Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada Related by Themselves with an Account of the History and Condition of the Colored Population of Upper Canada (Boston: John P. Jewett and Co., 1856), p.44.

[17]*Twelve Years a Slave*, pp. 308, 309.

[18]Earl Conrad, *Harriet Tubman: Negro Soldier and Abolitionist* (New York, International Publishers Co., Inc., 1942), p. 7.

[19]Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave*, in Gilbert Osofsky (ed.), Puttin' Off Ole Massa, p. 80.

[20]*Aunt Sally*, p. 10.

[21]Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, p. 507.

[22]Frances Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961), pp. 227, 228.

[23]*Twelve Years a Slave*, p. 316.

[24]*Aunt Sally*, p. 47.

[25]*Twelve Years a Slave*, p. 315.

[26]Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), p. 76.

[27]Kemble, pp. 229, 230.

[28]Gutman, p. 274.

[29]*Ibid.*, pp. 276-83.

[30]*Ibid.*, p. 76.

[31]*Aunt Sally*, p. 47.

[32]Conrad, p. 11.

[33]*Aunt Sally*, p. 65.

[34]Quoted in Nichols, *Many Thousand Gone*, p. 91.

[35]Gutman, p. 273.

[36]*Narrative of Henry Bibb*, p. 132.

[37]Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Boston: Published for the Author, 1861), p. 22.

[38]*Ibid.*, pp. 217, 218.

[39]*Ibid.*, p. 79.

[40]Lerone Bennett, Jr., "No Crystal Stair," p. 168.

[41]*Twelve Years a Slave*, p. 246.

[42]Quoted in Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, p. 426.

[43]Cited in Gerda Lerner (ed.), Black Women in White America, p. 52.

[44]Twelve Years a Slave, p. 328.

[45]Harriet Jacobs, pp. 80, 81.

[46]Footnoted in Gutman, pp. 80, 81.

[47]Cited in Nichols, Many Thousand Gone, p. 36.

[48]Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll, p. 501.

[49]Bennett, "No Crystal Stair," p. 164.